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# Editorial

*With 4 million deaths per year attributable to smoking*

## Why We Need an International Agreement on Tobacco Control

Tobacco use is pandemic. If the countries of the world do not act to reduce tobacco use, in the next 20 to 30 years 10 million people per year will be dying from the effects of this addictive drug. Individual countries acting in isolation cannot combat the problem. As Director General Gro Harlem Brundtland of the World Health Organization has noted, "the globalization of the tobacco industry's marketing strategies has contributed to a breakdown in local and national cultural barriers to tobacco use."<sup>1(p751)</sup> Tobacco use is truly a global health problem, requiring countries to cooperate in strong international action even as they tailor their tobacco control efforts to their own unique circumstances.

In October 2000, representatives from 150 countries convened in Geneva, Switzerland, to begin negotiating the first international agreement on tobacco control in the 50-year history of the World Health Organization. Due to be completed by 2003, this agreement is known as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The FCTC is expected to provide a means to stop the growth of tobacco use through a combination of national and international actions.

### *A Growing Global Health Problem*

The percentage of deaths worldwide that is attributable to tobacco use is projected to double from 6% in 1990 to 12.3% in 2020, surpassing diarrheal diseases, perinatal diseases, and tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup> Globally, about 4 million deaths per year are attributable to smoking. Over the next 30 years, if nothing is done to stop current trends, the tobacco-related death toll could rise to 10 million per year. Most—7

million—of these preventable deaths will occur in the developing world.<sup>3,4</sup> Over the past 20 years, there has been a gradual decrease in cigarette consumption in the developed countries and an increase in the developing countries. "Very rarely do we have the ability to predict an epidemic so far in the future and also have the knowledge to prevent it" is the blunt analysis from the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health.<sup>5(p25)</sup>

The world has responded to communicable diseases with efforts such as the World Health Organization's Roll Back Malaria Initiative and UNAIDS; similar international action is needed to counter the looming expansion of preventable tobacco-related diseases and death. The cross-border elements of the tobacco problem can best be addressed through coordinated international efforts involving not just traditional health ministries but also ministries of commerce, justice, and foreign affairs. The areas of tobacco control most needing coordinated international activity are antismuggling measures, advertising and sponsorship restrictions, ingredient testing methods, package design and labeling guidelines, price harmonization, treatment of tobacco dependence, and information sharing.<sup>6</sup> Progress in tobacco control can be made as countries coordinate their efforts, at least at a regional level.

### *Smuggling Keeps the Price of Tobacco Low*

Cigarette smuggling is an important element of the international tobacco problem. About one fifth of annual worldwide cigarette production is exported. Only two thirds of exported cigarettes show up as legal imports in

other countries each year. The “missing” cigarettes, about 6% of all those manufactured, are most likely smuggled around the world.<sup>7(p383)</sup> The European Commission has argued, on the basis of its analyses of tobacco industry documents in a recently filed lawsuit, that tobacco companies are heavily involved in smuggling schemes.<sup>8,9</sup>

Cigarette smuggling provides consumers with cigarettes at below-market prices, making cigarette smuggling a public health problem as well as a law enforcement problem. These cheaper cigarettes thwart national health policies that use price increases to reduce tobacco consumption. Tobacco companies argue against raising tobacco taxes because they say higher prices encourage smuggling from low-tax to high-tax countries; however, some analysts have found that poor enforcement of border controls is a better predictor of the level of smuggling than price differentials between countries.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the lower price of smuggled cigarettes leads to greater consumption than would occur otherwise.

### ***Advertising Spreads the Use of Tobacco***

As the large transnational tobacco companies such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco move into new markets around the world, they spend enormous amounts on advertising and promotion. The tobacco companies know, and public health research clearly demonstrates, that “tobacco advertising increases tobacco consumption.”<sup>10(p18)</sup> Young people are especially affected by advertising messages, even when the messages are not specifically addressed to them.<sup>11</sup>

Foreign cigarette advertising makes a deep impression in overseas markets. In China, highly advertised brands achieve wide recognition and consumer preference.<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of smoking among Chinese adult men is 63%, among male middle school students 23%. However, the potential effect of new advertising campaigns could be most dramatic for Chinese women, of whom only 3.8% now smoke, and girls, of whom only 5% now smoke.<sup>13(p384)</sup>

Tobacco companies adapt their advertising practices for developing countries, often across borders. Although advertisements for cigarettes are banned in the mass media in Malaysia, the international tobacco companies use sham businesses to circumvent the ban. Travel agencies, record shops, bistros, and clothing stores, in a process known as brand stretching, carry tobacco brand names such as Peter Stuyvesant Travel or Salem Cool Planet. The companies sponsor contests for young men

and women, and television documentaries show the winners enjoying their prizes. These documentaries are permeated with advertisements for non-tobacco-related businesses that just happen to have the same names as tobacco brands. Not coincidentally, these television programs are received in neighboring Thailand and Singapore, which ban all forms of tobacco advertising and sponsorship.<sup>14</sup>

The FCTC should be able to ensure cooperation among nations to address these transnational issues. By agreeing to general provisions in the FCTC itself and to more detailed provisions in related protocols, nations should be able to coordinate their efforts to combat smuggling and restrict advertising more effectively than they could through individual or bilateral efforts.

### ***Surveillance Sheds Light on the Problem and the Progress in Solving It***

Data and data analysis are crucial tools in communicating the nature and scope of the tobacco problem to policymakers and the public and in monitoring progress in reducing tobacco use. Data are needed on the prevalence of tobacco use, trends in tobacco consumption, the disease burden from tobacco use, tobacco control laws and regulations, and programmatic interventions, as well as on tobacco production, marketing, and trade.

Many countries do not have these data. At the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in August 2000, where I released the report *Reducing Tobacco Use*, the American Cancer Society, together with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, released a reference book titled *Tobacco Country Profiles*, which provides the most current and comprehensive documentation of the status of the tobacco use epidemic in 197 countries and territories.<sup>13,15</sup> After an exhaustive search, its authors were able to provide data on adult smoking prevalence in 158 of the 197 countries and territories and on youth smoking prevalence in 150, but most of the national estimates were from subnational surveys. The authors were able to provide estimates of smoking-attributable deaths in only 44 developed countries.

Clearly, much work needs to be done across borders to assist countries in developing and implementing systems for monitoring the many aspects of the tobacco use problem. Many countries will also need assistance in using these data for their own policy actions and comprehensive tobacco control programs.

## ***US Efforts Are Crucial to International Tobacco Control***

The United States is committed to supporting the FCTC and playing a leadership role in its development. This country has an impressive résumé in the tobacco control field: few countries have invested more in research, surveillance, and evaluation. The United States has pioneered work on regulatory approaches to tobacco control,<sup>16</sup> tough restrictions on secondhand smoke in federal buildings,<sup>17</sup> comprehensive enforcement of minimum-age-of-sale laws,<sup>18</sup> development and promotion of effective smoking cessation therapies,<sup>19</sup> and litigation to make tobacco companies accountable for their actions,<sup>20</sup> and it has enacted restrictions that prevent US Foreign Service personnel from promoting the sale of US tobacco products overseas.<sup>21,22</sup>

Other countries are also established leaders in tobacco control and have much to contribute to the global fight against tobacco. Canada leads the world in warning labels, with its new and graphic system of labels for all tobacco product packages, which became effective in January 2001; Canada also implemented tax increases to reduce consumption in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> Finland achieved large reductions in cigarette use among men, beginning in the 1970s, with its vigorous national programs against heart disease.<sup>24</sup> Norway instituted one of the first complete advertising bans.<sup>13(p5)</sup> Thailand has reduced smoking prevalence among males, in large part through a national advertising ban and a cigarette tax increase.<sup>3(p75)</sup> It plans to add Canadian-style package warning labels soon.<sup>25</sup> In the United Kingdom, tax increases have been effective in reducing consumption.<sup>3(p75)</sup> Australia has extensive restrictions on tobacco advertising and sports sponsorship, as well as strong warning labels on packages and a highly regarded media campaign.<sup>26</sup>

The most powerful export of the United States is its popular culture. The tobacco industry has taken advantage of this reality and, through its advertising, represented smoking as a central element of American culture. In the Philippines, images of Americans dominate tobacco advertising on television. The Marlboro Man has replaced Uncle Sam as an American icon. Tragically, in many developing countries, young people and women, hungering for American culture, turn to American cigarettes, to the detriment of global public health. It is essential that the United States contribute its expertise to international efforts to help the developing world avoid repeating the mistakes that have made tobacco our leading cause of preventable illness and premature death.<sup>27</sup>

## Coordinated Efforts Can Make a Difference

In the United States, we have learned from our mistakes. Tobacco consumption in the United States is on the decline overall, but this improvement has taken more than 4 decades. It need not be inevitable that the developing world repeat the US experience. Only through international collaboration can the projected epidemic of tobacco-related diseases that threatens lives—and economic expansion—in the developing world be avoided. Whether we, and the community of nations, have the will to adopt effective tobacco control strategies will determine our success in ending the tobacco pandemic. □

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